

Having just returned from a bipartisan congressional trip to Iraq and Afghanistan, I am more convinced than ever that we must change course in Iraq and end this unconscionable war.

Our six member delegation, three Democrats and three Republicans, spent two days in Iraq and two days in Afghanistan observing first hand the situation in each country. At every turn in our trip, we encountered the courageous men and women of our armed services. They are doing an incredible job under very dangerous and trying circumstances.

Meeting American troops in the war zone was a privilege, particularly the three Vermonters I met in Afghanistan from St. Albans, Winooski, and Moretown. And I was proud when a general I met in Qatar gave high praise for the Vermont Air National Guard for the quality training it provided to his airmen here in Vermont.

While the circumstances in each country and each war are different, I came away with the clear impression that the will of Afghani leaders to step up to the plate and take control of their future is far stronger than that of Iraqi leaders. That impression was reinforced by separate conversations I had with three American soldiers serving in Afghanistan who had previously served in Iraq. Each soldier offered the same instructive insight: In Iraq, the people are more interested in fighting each other, while in Afghanistan they are fighting for their future.

In Afghanistan, 37 allied nations have joined together to help the Afghanis drive out the Taliban and restore order. And political leaders have demonstrated a clear commitment to establishing a functioning government. President Karzai told us candidly that his government has legitimacy, but not efficiency and that he needs the coalition's continued help to improve their government.

Iraq, on the other hand, is in a full blown civil war -- a fact now acknowledged by the Pentagon and the bipartisan Iraq Study Group, but still denied by President Bush. The British, our last remaining significant ally in Iraq, will soon withdraw and American forces are now viewed as occupiers.

Four years after the start of the Iraq war, it is time to bring it to an end and for Iraqi leaders to make the political decisions necessary for peace. Consistent with the recommendations of the

Iraq Study Group Iraqi politicians must, at a minimum:

- enact legislation to share Iraq's oil wealth;
- return competent civil servants from the banned Baath party to their government posts;
- manage the country's natural resources in a way that produces much needed revenue to build the infrastructure; and
- establish a zero tolerance policy for sectarianism in their police force.

These actions would be a convincing demonstration that the Iraqi leadership is serious about assuming responsibility for Iraq's future.

My experience reinforces my strong belief that we must revoke the President's blank check for this war, impose accountability on the President and the Iraqi leadership and, most importantly, we must establish a date certain to end the war.

Doing so will send a clear signal to Iraqi political leaders that we will no longer have an open-ended presence in Iraq and that there are limits to what American soldiers and taxpayers can and should do.

It is well past time for the Iraqi government to step up to the plate and assume responsibility for creating the necessary conditions for peace. And if they do, America will continue to provide them the assistance they need to rebuild their war ravaged country.

The war in Iraq is a terrible tragedy. Our best hope to reduce further suffering is to change the direction of our policy. It is time to end this war.

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